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ABSTRACT

The community should be seen as an essential focus for communication study since it (1) illustrates and tests the instrumental nature of human communication, (2) illustrates the delicate interplay of private and public communication, and (3) provides a unique context in which all human interactive units exert communication influence simultaneously. Community in this sense is best defined as a communication-engendered, psychological construct based upon consensual perceptions of common identity, interdependence, obligation, and efficacy. Community exists, then, when individuals sense that it exists as a result of their interactions with other individuals. What is not clear at present is what communication skills are minimally essential for the creation of community. What is clear is that there is opportunity for communicative research about how communication is or can be used instrumentally to sustain and enhance consensual perceptions of identity, interdependence and obligation, and efficacy among community residents. To argue the value of community study is nothing more than to urge that community as a level of social organization should be included in any effort to account for the complexity of human communicative behavior. (HOD)

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COMMUNITY AS AN ESSENTIAL FOCUS FOR COMMUNICATION STUDY

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This Dimension Series program is, for me, the latest episode in fourteen years of personal fascination and frustration with the notion of community. My goal here is to argue for the value of community as a communicative study. Perhaps the best way to do so is to indicate how I was led--awkwardly but inexorably--toward an interest in concept of community.

My interest in community began with musings about the instrumental nature of human communication and curiosity about the poorly-defined distinction between private and public communication. As a student of rhetoric and as an essentially pragmatic native of Missouri, I have always been less interested in what communication <u>is</u> ~~and~~ than in <u>how</u> it works. Rather, I have been captured by the proposition to which all students of communication pay homage--that communication is instrumental. As I understand this statement, it means that communication is <u>the</u> essential human tool. With communication we create, develop, sustain, and change things--things like self-identity, notions of reality and fantasy, human knowledge, relationships, and systems of social organization. To say that communication is instrumental is to challenge ourselves to become <u>artful pragmatists</u>--to discover the means for exerting influence through other people for identifiable ends. I suspect this focus is mostly responsible for burgeoning undergraduate enrollments; it provides us with a ready answer to that inelegant but inevitable question: "Yes, but what can you <u>do</u> with a major in communication?"

As a student of rhetoric and public address, I have been fascinated and puzzled by the distinction made--often glibly and dogmatically--between

private and public communicative acts. Common sense, for example, suggests to me that some communicative acts are private and some are public. It does not require genius to recognize something qualitatively different between the rhetoric of the bedroom and the rhetoric of the boardroom. Nevertheless, I have found--as perhaps you have--that efforts to delineate the distinction between private and public communication are rarely made at all and are less than satisfying when they are attempted. For example, I reject as nonsense the argument that interpersonal communication which is characterized by a high degree of personal self-disclosure is private communication and all else is public. I watched along with millions of other Americans as Teddy Kennedy bared his soul to the people of Massachusetts and the nation following the tragedy at Chappaquiddick.

I reject, too, the implication found in Richard Sennett's book, The Fall of Public Man, that the ascendancy of private communication is achieved at the expense of public communication and vice versa.[1] I recognize no such limitations to the potentials for human communication.

It is worth noting that the distinction between private and public communication remains an open question for our field and a matter of concern for other fields. Recently, for example, the Center for 20th Century Studies on the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus announced that it is devoting a year of inter-disciplinary inquiry into the distinction between private and public communication. I suspect that most of us in the field of speech communication have confronted the question of the distinction between private and public communication at some time or another and, perhaps, have generated a sufficient answer to that question. But I am not aware of

any authoritative treatment of the question or of any efforts to test and illustrate some conception of the distinction between private and public communication.

For me--for now--the distinction between private and public communication is best approached phenomenologically. Attention must be given to a series of consensual and interdependent perceptions which define an interaction as public or private. These perceptions appear to me to include: 1. perceptions of context and accessibility to context; 2. perceptions of relationship including such issues as trust and relational style; and 3. perceptions of message content including language characteristics. I see nothing profound in such a conceptualization of the distinction between private and public communication--only a theoretical scheme which allows me to account, in a tentative way, for some intriguing differences in human communicative behavior.

At this point you are right to ask what all of this has to do with how I came to focus on the notion of community or, more importantly, why I would argue that a focus on community is essential to the study of communication. Let me offer three propositions which I will develop through the remainder of this paper and which, I believe, argue the value of community as an essential focus for communication study:

> First, community, perhaps as no other level of social organization, illustrates and tests the instrumental nature of human communication.
>
> Secondly, community, perhaps as no other level of social organization, illustrates the delicate interplay of private and public communication; and
>
> Finally, I will argue that community is perhaps <u>the</u> unique context in which all human interactive units

> exert communicative influence simultaneously. To understand the meaning and functioning of community is to understand more than we know now about the relationships among interacting units.

Before attempting to develop these propositions, however, let me define what I mean by "community." Community, I believe, is best defined as a communication-engendered, psychological construct based upon consensual perceptions of common identity, interdependence, obligation, and efficacy. From this view, community is defined directly from the experiences of individuals as they interact with each other and as they develop common interpretations of their experiences. Community exists, then, when individuals sense that it exists as a result of their interactions with other individuals. Seymour Sarason appears to substantiate this definition of community when he writes:

> Precisely because we all experience the presence or absence of a psychological sense of community . . . some of its characteristics are not hard to state. The perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure--these are some of the ingredients of the psychological sense of community. You know when you have it and when you don't.[2]

From this perspective community is not a place but a series of interrelated and consensual perceptions which grew out of interaction. Clearly, community can exist as part of some spatially-defined areas--such as the residential neighborhood, but it is not restricted to such locales.[3]

Let me turn now to the first of three propositions which, I believe, argue the value of community as an essential focus for communication study. Community illustrates and tests the instrumental nature of communication. As the earlier definition of community suggests, community is created, developed, sustained, and changed through communication. In her book,

Contemporary Community, British sociologist Jacqueline Scherer summarized what appears to be commonplace among social scientists: the understanding that communication is the sine qua non of community. She writes:

> John Dewey recognized that communication is at the heart of any community: we can only share in common what we can communicate with others. Communication. . . is the life-blood of all social structures.[4]

Philosopher Glenn Tinder is even more direct. "Community," he argues, "is enacted in the activity of communication."[5] And sociologist George Hillery, Jr., after reviewing 104 definitions of community found that the only common element in all such definitions was agreement that community is created and developed through communicative interaction. The process by which community is created and developed is interestingly traced by Herbert Gans. In The Levittowners, Gans writes:

> Different kinds of people came to Levittown for houses: some because it was cheaper than the city; some to get land for the children; some to have more privacy than in a flat. The builder provided a house that met these needs at a price they could afford. Once there, residents had social contacts with those immediately close; they then joined various organizations to find people with whom they shared some common interests. In time, those within the organization who agreed on basic issues and values united (a) to gain power over the organization itself and (b) eventually to use the organization as a means of sharing the wider power in overall place of Levittown. As they did this, some residents found themselves in a community and recognized it as such.[6]

It is clear that community is not a "given"; it is intentionally created or neglected. What is not clear at present is what communication skills are minimally essential for the creation of community. I am disturbed, as perhaps you are, by the implication that community is the serendipitous result of some kind of communicative activity over some indefinite period of time.

We do not accept that kind of ambiguity concerning other levels of social organization, and I see no reason for communication scholars to accept it with regard to community. If we knew, for example, what was minimally essential to create community we could explain, among other things, why it is difficult to synthesize community and why planned communities are often such abysmal failures.

The instrumental nature of communication is further illustrated and tested as we examine the ways by which community or a "sense of community" is sustained. Social scientists agree that, just as a "sense of community" is created through communication, it is sustained by communication. Through communication the essential but often fragile perceptions and relationships which define sense of community are confirmed and enhanced. Social scientists have linked extensiveness of communication contact with a persisting sense of community, and preliminary research has demonstrated that the sense of community is enhanced by greater frequency of visiting among community residents, and the kinds of contact which permit residents to know each other by their first names.[8] A limited amount of research has linked consensual definition of neighborhood or community boundaries to a strengthened sense of community,[9] but that is an inconsistent finding. Various studies have also linked the extent of borrowing, shared supervision of children, house and apartment watching, cooperative efforts among residents to reduce crime and even local shopping interactions to an enhanced sense of community among community residents.[10] Perhaps most interesting of this research is the work of Derek Phillips who linked "interaction opportunities" with "investment" in and satisfaction with local community structures.[11]

Finally, a host of studies seek to examine the extent and effectiveness of extra-community interaction with sense of community. Thomas Bender, for example, examines what he calls the "interplay of communal orientations with the larger society" and argues for a reconceptualization and remarriage of the notions of gemeinschaft and gesellschaft.[12] I suspect that my colleagues on this program and, in particular, Professor Reagan have some insights to offer in this area.

What appears clear is that there is opportunity for communicative research about how communication is or can be used instrumentally to sustain and enhance consensual perceptions of identity, interdependence and obligation, and perceptions of efficacy among community residents. As I trust this program demonstrates, some progress has been made in that direction.

Perhaps most intriguing for those interested in illustrating and testing the instrumental nature of communication is the notion of community change. To speak of a "sense of community" is often to suggest a homeostatic state in which various competing interests are uniformly satisfied or subdued. Jacqueline Scherer offers a more realistic picture when she writes:

> Those who see community as an emotional bond of togetherness usually paint their image in glowing colors of warmth and affection, dimming out, as far as possible, the strains, tensions, and inevitable clash of interests that are normally present in hues just as strong. This is because most of us have been reluctant to understand the complexity of conflict and the important part it plays in human affairs.[13]

I believe I could spend the remainder of my time identifying profitable areas of research focusing on the uses of speech communication to alter in ways subtle and profound the nature and functioning of community. It

seems unnecessary in late 1981 to suggest that community as a level of social organization cannot avoid conflict. Indeed, as Richard Sennett suggests in The Uses of Disorder, unless conflict and conflict management are a part of the community structure true community cannot and does not exist.[14] I find it difficult to believe that those who understand human relationships and human social structures of any kind regard Sennett's suggestion as radical. The fact of conflict in community offers opportunities to discover how communication used instrumentally provokes, exacerbates, and manages community conflicts.

There is time here only to sketch. What I have attempted to argue is that the notion of community offers ample research opportunities to those interested in the instrumental nature of communication. In discovering how communication operates to create, develop, sustain, and change "sense of community" we will discover more than we now know about pragmatic, human communication. That much should recommend community study to communication scholars. But, as I indicated earlier, there is more.

Earlier I offered the proposition that community, perhaps as no other level of social organization, illustrates the delicate interplay of private and public communication. Let me outline the argument here. I have been made uncomfortable, as perhaps you have, by the argument of Richard Sennett that the pursuit of communal solidarity and community identity results in an ultimately destructive "myth of community" in which diversity, flexibility, and ambiguity are sacrificed to homogeneity, exclusiveness, and predictability.[15] It is hard to resist some components of Sennett's argument. But it is also true that the "communal urge" is a search for identity and emotional

support in a complex and impersonal world. As Jacqueline Scherer points out, "(C) ommunity. . . (is) the means by which issues of loneliness, impersonality, bigness and loss of power can be redressed. . . . a context within which to find personal acceptance and recognition denied in other situations."[16]

A central problem with "sense of community" is the tension between private needs and concerns and public demands. The development of common identity, for example, involves the emergence of a sense of "we-ness" with some number of individuals. But inherent in this is a sense of disidentity with others, a process of disidentification. The issue then, of how "others" will be assimilated into the community is persistent and vexing. Yet, community scholars are virtually unanimous in arguing that community structures which are incapable of assimilating new members are doomed to extinction.

What is needed is an exploration of how this tension can be managed so that personal and public concerns are satisfied. Members of a community are simultaneously involved, as Thomas Bender points out, in different kinds of social relationships and hold different statuses depending upon whether they are acting out a role as a member of a family, as a close friend or neighbor, or as political men and women. These roles, he argues, are--or should be--mutually reenforcing and collectively constitute what is meant by the community.[17]

Just how all of this is managed however is an open question. I suggest that investigating how this is managed is likely to illustrate for communication scholars the distinction between private communication and public

communication. To investigate the community from this perspective is to search for the means by which individuals develop perceptions of the communal context and the more restrictive contexts which must exist within the communal structure. Such investigation will probe the relationships which emerge with a developing sense of community and the varying quality of those relationships. Some community engendered relationships will presumably satisfy the requirements needed for "private" communication and some will be limited to public interaction. Such investigation will also probe message content and language features which characterize some community-based interactions as private and others as public. I am not, of course, arguing for utilization of the theoretical scheme I have outlined in approaching the issue of private versus public communication. I am, however, arguing that whatever scheme we might construct to account for the distinction between private and public communication may be profitably tested and illustrated through a focus upon community processes.

Finally, and very briefly, I argue that to understand the meaning and functioning of community is to understand more than we know now about the relationships among interacting units which exert influence simultaneously. Interpersonal relationships, for example, are imbedded within community structures. If those relationships are to be fully understood, some account must be made of the extent to which they are influenced by and exert influence upon the community. The same point may be made of group interactions especially those group interactions which emerge from community concerns or those group interactions which emerge from a desire to go beyond community concerns. Organizations, too, are influenced by and exert influence upon the community. To understand the community is to account

for those influences and to reveal more than we currently know about decision processes within organizations. To understand the community is, I submit, to understand better the nature of inter-ethnic and even inter-cultural communication. In recent years communication scholars have focused attention upon the interaction of various levels of social organization. To argue the value of community study is nothing more or less than to urge that community as a level of social organization should be included in any effort to account for the complexity of human communicative behavior.

I began this presentation by suggesting that my interest in community has been characterized by fascination and frustration. I trust this brief sketch has identified some of the reasons why, as a student of communication, I am fascinated and compelled to a study of community. My frustration may be described very quickly. Some time ago, I submitted a paper for review to a communication journal. The study represented an early attempt to probe the communicative correlates of "sense of community." The paper was returned with this brief note: "This study deals with an interesting subject and is well thought and executed. However, it deals with much more than communication. I think a sociology journal would be more appropriate than a communication journal." I never want to read such a review again from a colleague in communication.

Footnotes

[1]Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

[2]Seymour B. Sarason, The Psychological Sense of Community: Prospects for a Community Psychology (San Francisco: Josey-Ball, 1974) p. 1.

[3]See Gerald D. Suttles, The Social Construction of Communities (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972) for an extended argument of this point.

[4]Jacqueline Scherer, Contemporary Community (London, England: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1972) p. 104.

[5]Glenn Tinder, Community: Reflections on a Tragic Ideal (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1980) p. 80.

[6]Herbert Gans, The Levittowners (London: Allen Lane Publishers, 1972).

[7]A. Alexander Fanelli, "Extensiveness of Communicative Contacts and Perceptions of the Community," American Sociological Review, 21, August, 1956, p. 440.

[8]Robert J. Doolittle and Donald MacDonald, "Communication and a Sense of Community in a Metropolitan Neighborhood: A Factor Analytic Examination," Communication Quarterly (1978), Vol. 26, No. 23, pp. 2-7.

[9]Jacqueline Scherer, op. cit.

[10]See, for example, Jack Wayne, "Networks of Informal Participation in a Suburban Context" Ph.D. dissertation (University of Minnesota, Sociology, 1973).

[11]Derek L. Phillips, "Social Class, Social Participation and Happiness: A Consideration of 'Interaction Opportunities' and 'Investment'," Sociological Quarterly, 10 (1969), 3-21.

[12]Thomas Bender, Community and Social Change in America (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1978).

[13]Jacqueline Scherer, op. cit., p. 67.

[14]Richard Sennett, The Uses of Disorder (New York: Vintage Books, 1970.

[15]Ibid., pp. 2[illegible]9.

[16]Jacqueline Scherer, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

[17]Thomas Bender, op. cit., p. 118.